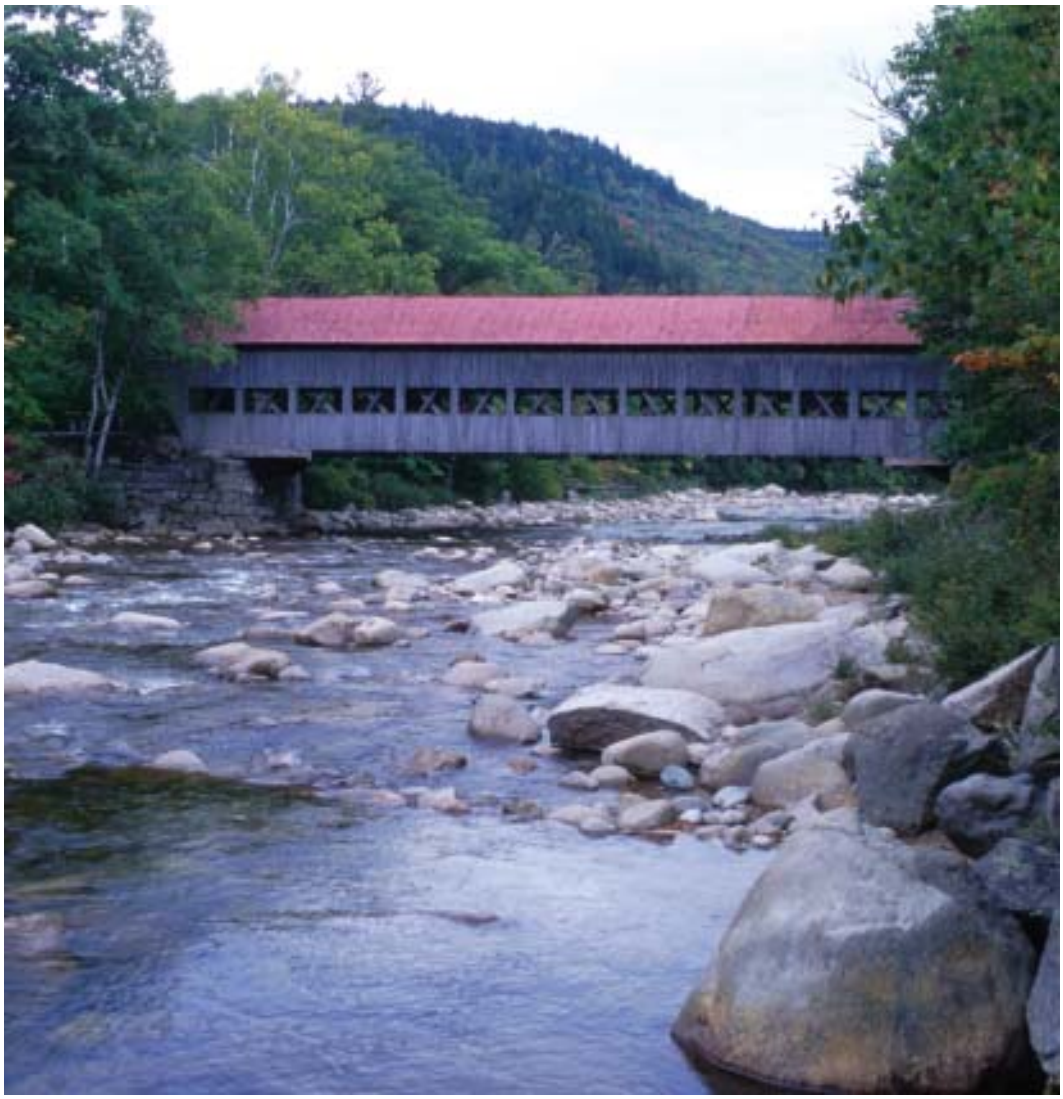
White Mountain National Forest

Chapter 1
Purpose and Need for Change



Chapter Contents

Cover

Albany covered bridge (WMNF Photo)

Introduction

About the White Mountain National Forest

The White Mountain National Forest encompasses approximately 796,800 acres in northern New Hampshire (including Coos, Carroll, and Grafton Counties) and western Maine (Oxford County). It was established under the provisions of the Weeks Law of 1911, which authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to include cut-over and denuded land in forest purchases. This far-thinking law was responsible for most of the Eastern National Forests. The first land purchase for the White Mountain National Forest was in the town of Benton, in 1914.

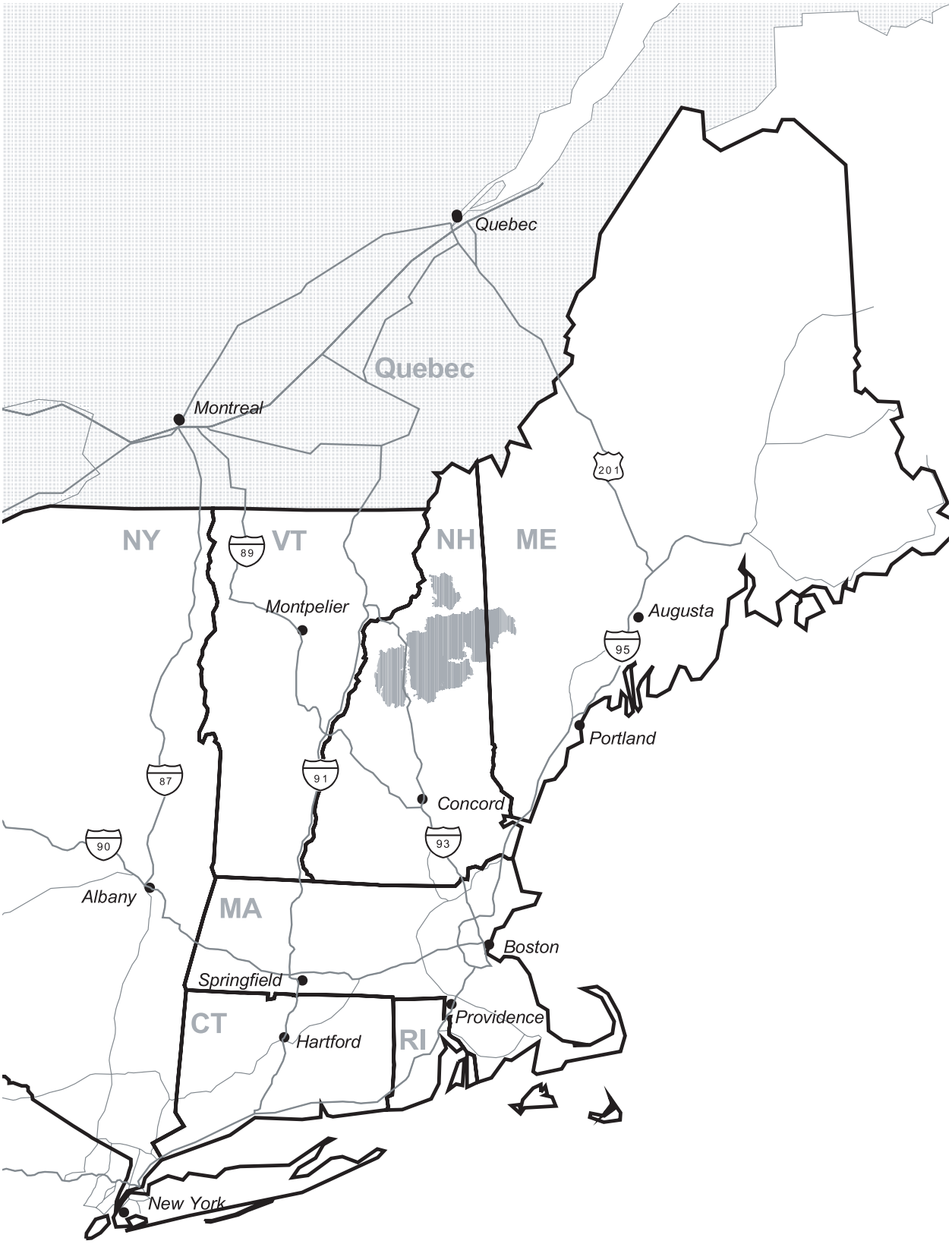
Characterized by rugged mountain peaks and the largest alpine zone in the East, the Forest has forty-eight summits of 4,000 feet and higher, including Mount Washington, the highest peak in the Northeast. A variety of species — softwoods and northern hardwoods, rare and unique plants, fish, birds, and other animals — can be found and are part of the attraction for visitors. The dramatic landscape, so close to major metropolitan areas (Boston, Massachusetts, is only 130 miles to the south; New York City only a half-day drive; and Montreal, Quebec less than one day's drive), has made the White Mountains a destination for people seeking a variety of recreation experiences for close to two centuries.

The USDA Forest Service administers the White Mountain National Forest, aided by partners, other agencies, individuals, and concessionaires. There are three ranger districts: the Androscoggin in the northeast, the Saco in the southeast, and the Ammonoosuc/Pemigewasset District covering the western side of the Forest. The Forest Headquarters is currently located in Laconia, New Hampshire.

About the Plan and the FEIS

The principal tool for preserving, protecting, and managing the resources that comprise the White Mountain National Forest, while at the same time making those resources available to the public for a variety of uses, is the Land and Resource Management Plan (the Forest Plan). This document has recently been revised, as required by the National Forest Management Act. As part of the process, a range of management alternatives was developed. Each provides a different approach for meeting the Forest's needs and addressing issues that have been identified by the public and Forest Service personnel. This publication, the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), documents the potential effects of applying each alternative on the physical, biological, and social environment. This intensive study gave the Regional Forester the information necessary to decide which alternative provided the best balance. The selected alternative became the revised Forest Plan.

Figure 1-01. The White Mountain National Forest With Major Cities and Travel Routes.



The FEIS addresses:

1. The Purpose and Need for Change — why the Forest Plan is being revised and what issues must be considered in the revision process.
2. The Alternatives — a range of reasonable approaches for meeting the purpose and need and addressing the issues.
3. The Affected Environment — the physical, biological, and social settings within the Forest and its surrounding area.
4. The Environmental Effects — the effects of each alternative on the Forest's resources, as well as the surrounding social and economic environments, in the long- and short-term and cumulatively.

These elements are considered within the framework of the Desired Future Condition (DFC), a vision of what the Forest will look like and what benefits it will provide into the future.

The Forest Plan states the goals and objectives to achieve the DFC, and establishes standards and guidelines to govern management activities, both Forest-wide and in each of the Forest's management areas.

A monitoring and evaluation strategy is included in the Plan, which will help determine how well management direction is being met. Monitoring provides a basis for the periodic evaluation and amending of the Forest Plan.

Decisions Made in the Forest Plan

Six programmatic decisions are made in the Forest Plan that will govern the landscape-scale management of the Forest. Project-level decisions are made within the established framework of the Plan.

1. Forest-wide multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11(b)).
2. Forest-wide management standards and guidelines (36 CFR 219.13-27).
3. Management area direction (36 CFR 219.11).
4. Lands suited for timber production (36 CFR 219.14), and establishment of an allowable sale quantity (36 CFR 219.16).
5. Monitoring and evaluation requirements (36 CFR 219.11(d)).
6. Recommendations to Congress (e.g., recommendations for Wilderness (36 CFR 219.17)).

Changes Between Draft and Final EIS

The Forest Service received well-prepared and constructive comments on the DEIS and Proposed Plan. Both public and internal comments were considered in preparing the Final EIS and revised Plan.

Changes made for the final documents range from minor editing for improved clarity to changes in management direction, desired conditions, objectives, and standards and guidelines. Some changes resulted from data corrections, new survey information, and field verification. The summary below describes the most substantial changes made between the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements and the proposed and revised Plan.

Changes to Mountain Biking Management Direction

Direction in the proposed Forest Plan had stated that Forest development trails would be open to mountain bike use unless signed closed, travel corridors would be closed to bike use unless signed open, and cross-country travel would be prohibited. While there was general public support for prohibiting cross-country travel, many commenters were concerned that there was not enough information at this point to restrict the use of travel corridors without further site-specific analysis.

The Selected Alternative maintains the prohibition of cross country travel outlined in the proposed Forest Plan. In addition, Wilderness Areas, the Appalachian Trail, and any other specific Area Closure implemented through a Forest Supervisor Order will also remain closed to mountain bike use. However, all other Forest development trails and travel corridors will remain open to mountain bike use, unless signed closed. The intent is that, as the Forest Plan is implemented, eventually all trails and some additional travelways will be part of a designated non-motorized trail system on the Forest. The Forest Service will work with mountain bike organizations and other concerned stakeholders to determine, through site-specific analysis, which travel corridors will be managed and maintained as part of the designated Forest trail system.

Inventoried Roadless Process

Concerns were raised that the DEIS lacked an explanation of the roadless inventory process, that documentation of the process was insufficient, and that the inventory criteria had been inconsistently applied across the Forest. Based on these comments, additional information about the inventory process is included in the FEIS (Appendix C). Additional documentation that further outlines each step of the process is also included in the Administrative Record.

The Forest Service reviewed decisions made on specific boundary locations of various inventoried roadless areas, based on public comment. This review resulted in approximately 13,000 acres being added to four of the existing inventoried roadless areas, consistent with our original roadless area criteria. Forest employees also completed further field verification of improved roads near existing inventoried areas which could have a potential effect on the size of the overall inventory areas for the Forest. This review demonstrated that most roads were correctly mapped in the original inventory, but that a few roads no longer meet the improved road criteria. These have been dropped from our improved road GIS map layer. This field verification resulted in the addition of one inventoried roadless area, in the Sawyer River area, which is approximately 6,718 acres in size.

The changes between draft and final have resulted in a total of 403,144 acres of inventoried roadless areas in 27 different areas of the Forest.

Wilderness Boundaries

The Selected Alternative recommends the same two areas for Wilderness consideration as the Draft EIS. However, minor boundary changes were made to the Sandwich Range Recommended Wilderness to improve overall boundary management, avoid areas of active timber management, and incorporate some additional wilderness attributes. The two affected areas are along the southeastern and southwestern boundary of the Recommended Wilderness, in the Algonquin Trail and Ferncroft areas. This change will add an additional 900 acres to Management Area 9.1 (Recommended Wilderness).

Changes to the Application of Prescribed Fire

The proposed Forest Plan stated that prescribed fire was prohibited in MA 7.1 (Alpine Ski Areas) and MA 9.2 (Ski Area Expansion). Commenters suggested that prescribed fire should be used in these as an alternate slope management tool for vegetation control at alpine ski areas. An example would be to use fire on slopes that are too steep for wheeled or tracked equipment, and that do not pose an unacceptable risk to ski lifts or other improvements. The revised Forest Plan will allow prescribed fire in these MAs.

Acid Deposition, Soil Productivity, and Water Quality Analysis

Some commenters raised concerns about the adequacy of our acid deposition, soil productivity, and land suitability analysis relative to timber harvest. The analysis area for soil productivity and management of outstanding resource waters was also questioned. In the FEIS, the analysis area for soils was redefined, and discussion and analysis of these soil and water concerns was expanded.

Additions to Species Viability Evaluation (SVE) List

Based on 2004 survey data and further peer review, six species (Brown's ameletid mayfly, third ameletid mayfly, *Arctostaphylos alpina*, *Carex exilis*, *Corallorhiza odontorhiza*, and *Epilobium anagallidifolium*) were added to the SVE list since the release of the DEIS. The potential for each alternative to impact these species is addressed in the Rare and Unique Features section and Appendix F of the FEIS.

Management Area 9.5 — Newly Acquired Lands

The DEIS stated that newly acquired lands would be placed in a holding status (MA 9.5) pending an analysis to determine the land's management area prescription. Internal review indicated that allocating a management area to new lands at the time of acquisition would be more expedient than placing them in a holding area. As stated in the revised Plan, a new land acquisition will be allocated to the same management area as the surrounding National Forest land if it has similar attributes. If the land attributes are unique, or are different from the surrounding land, the acquired tract will be evaluated by an interdisciplinary team to decide its management area prescription. This meets the intent of MA 9.5 to allocate management area designations to new land acquisitions.

Desired Future Condition (DFC)

The DFC is a formal part of the planning process, expressing an ideal for the future of the White Mountain National Forest that incorporates all facets of its rich ecological, social, and economic landscape. As a visionary statement, it is traditionally written in the present tense.

The landscape of the White Mountain National Forest is unique in New England. It provides opportunities that are not available on private or other public lands. The Forest's resources are managed to ensure that their social and economic values to the region will benefit both present and future generations.

The ecological processes necessary to maintain the Forest's biological diversity are provided across the landscape. Populations of native and desired non-native species of plants and animals thrive and offer opportunities for viewing, hunting, and fishing. Habitat management activities maintain and enhance habitat for rare species and other species valued by Forest users, and support recovery of threatened and endangered species. The Forest continues to provide some of the most natural appearing and scenic mountainous settings in New England.

The National Forest is enjoyed for a wide range of high quality recreation opportunities, mountain and forest scenery, and an extensive trail network. The management emphasis is on non-motorized and dispersed activities, such as hiking, mountain biking, and backpacking, especially in primitive and semi-primitive settings. The Forest provides opportunities for activities that can only be pursued in mountainous terrain, such as rock and ice climbing and alpine skiing. The Forest also provides opportunities for many other recreation activities, such as camping in developed and dispersed areas, driving for pleasure, winter motorized trail riding, swimming, fishing, hunting, hobby mineral collecting, and natural and cultural resource interpretation.

The Wilderness areas of the White Mountain National Forest provide opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation as populations around the Forest grow. In addition, Wilderness provides significant ecological values — filtering air pollution, sequestering carbon, providing unbroken wildlife habitat, and protecting watersheds. These lands are managed to allow natural processes to predominate, and to minimize the impacts of human intrusion. Wilderness on the White Mountain National Forest provides unique educational opportunities not found in other places. Our interpretive programs and materials allow visitors become more familiar with natural processes, recognize the evolving role of humans in affecting landscape change, and see how those same processes occur around their homes.

The Forest continues to provide high quality hardwood and softwood sawtimber, as well as other forest products, primarily for local and regional markets. Sustainable forestry activities occur on about 47 percent of the Forest in a manner that is compatible with other resource and recreation objectives. During any one year, harvesting operations will be active on a very small

part of the Forest, generally on no more than one percent of the overall landbase.

Water quality standards are met and long-term productivity of the Forest is sustained. Water resources support a variety of uses, while watersheds maintain their natural hydrologic function. Watersheds are managed in cooperation with local, state, and federal agencies so that high quality water supplies can be provided to local communities while sustaining aquatic ecosystems.

Transportation networks and facilities are provided to support the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. Road networks are managed to provide safe travel, while ensuring that environmental impacts from roads are mitigated where possible.

Stewardship of the National Forest continues to be a collaborative effort between local communities, Forest users, private sector entities, nonprofit partners, and other government agencies. Many programs, facilities, and services that contribute to local and regional economies and the quality of life are developed and implemented through partnerships, volunteer programs, cooperative agreements, and donations. Educational and interpretive programs deliver messages about natural and cultural history, land conservation, and multiple use issues to local communities and Forest users. Educational institutions, government agencies, and other entities assist in determining research activities on the Forest.

An ongoing monitoring and evaluation program is in place, focused on reviewing progress toward implementing the Forest Plan goals and objectives. Monitoring efforts identify effects to date and how they match what was anticipated, new information, and the need to change the Plan through amendments.

Proposed Action

The USDA Forest Service proposes to revise the 1986 Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the White Mountain National Forest. The Forest Plan, in conjunction with Forest Service Manuals and Handbooks, will provide direction for managing the natural resources of the Forest for the next 10 to 15 years.

Purpose and Need for Forest Plan Revision

The purpose of the revision rests in the requirements of the National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations contained in 36 CFR 219. Forest Plans are revised every 10 to 15 years. It has been more than 15 years since the White Mountain National Forest Plan was approved, making revision necessary.

Since its implementation in 1986, the Forest Plan has provided the framework for management decisions related to the continuing health of the Forest and its ability to provide multiple uses to the public. However, inadequacies and omissions in the Plan need to be addressed more extensively than can be covered by amendments. Four indicators suggest the need for revision:

- Public use of the Forest has changed.
- Agency goals and objectives, along with other national guidance for strategic plans and programs, have changed since 1986.
- Results of monitoring and evaluation suggest the need for revision.
- New information from the Forest Service, universities, and organizations that study forest ecosystems and forest management is available.

Public Involvement

(See Appendix A for a complete discussion of public involvement.)

Public involvement and input have been essential elements of the White Mountain National Forest Plan revision process since it began. In 1997, the Forest conducted public outreach sessions to identify changes needed in the 1986 Forest Plan that was currently being implemented. Those sessions generated over 3,000 comments that the Forest grouped into 31 topics of concern.

In February 2000, the White Mountain National Forest issued a *Notice of Intent and Description of Proposal for Revising the White Mountain National Forest Plan* (NOI) which initiated the planning process. It discussed the Plan, the Plan revision process, and the role of the Forest. The NOI identified forest plan revision needs; it also set out items that would not be addressed in revision. Between the 1997 outreach sessions and the 2000 Notice of Intent, the Forest reorganized and aggregated the 31 topics of concern into 23 topics.

Local Planning Groups (LPGs) were established in four geographic areas where the Forest's primary constituents are based. Meetings were held monthly at these locations for more than two years. Each month, the LPG attendees and members of the interdisciplinary plan revision team would discuss, in depth, one or more of the 23 topics of concern published in the NOI. Members of the public offered options to current management approaches for all 23 topics. Similar meetings were held with Native American tribes, federal and state agencies, local governments, and private organizations and individuals.

Next, the 23 topics of concern were screened through the National Forest Management Act to determine if they represented a compelling need for change in a) resource conditions or b) public needs. Six need for change topics met one or both NFMA conditions.

Need for Change

The six areas of concern indicating a need for change are timber management, wildlife habitat management, roadless and unroaded area management, Wilderness recommendation, motorized dispersed recreation, and non-motorized dispersed recreation. Upon further consideration, motorized and non-motorized dispersed recreation were combined, resulting in five areas that demonstrated a need for change.

Timber Management Need for Change

Some members of the public believe that timber harvest should not be allowed on public lands, either for forest products or to achieve resource objectives. Others are concerned that harvest levels should be increased to achieve the current Forest Plan allowable sale quantity. Some consider clearcutting and the resulting forest openings to be detrimental to the Forest's scenic attraction and inappropriate as a harvest method, while another view holds that clearcutting (even-aged management) is important for providing wildlife habitat and viewing "windows." There is a need, within the context of the Plan revision, to respond to these concerns, and to address the trade-offs among various methods and amounts of vegetation management.

Wildlife Habitat Management Need for Change

The current Forest Plan has goals and objectives for wildlife habitat conditions that contribute to the maintenance of viable populations, and these will not change. What does need to be reevaluated is the mix of habitat objectives — from early successional to old growth — established in the current Forest Plan to maintain those populations, as well as the strategy for implementing the goals.

Specific items that need to be evaluated include 1) consideration of natural disturbance patterns on the Forest in developing habitat objectives; 2) guidelines or objectives on the spatial arrangements of habitats across the Forest; 3) incorporation of stand structure into habitat objectives; 4) reevaluation of management indicator species; 5) reassessment of species viability; and 6) incorporation of the latest scientific information.

Roadless and Unroaded Area Management Need for Change

There is a diversity of public opinion as to what lands should be considered roadless. There are also differences of opinion on what uses should be allowed on those roadless lands not recommended for Wilderness. A roadless area inventory was completed during the Plan revision process, and each roadless area has been evaluated for Wilderness recommendation based on three criteria: capability, availability, and need (see the Wilderness section in Chapter 3 and Appendix C to the FEIS). This Environmental Impact Statement identifies a range of management alternatives for those roadless areas not proposed for Wilderness recommendation.

Wilderness Recommendation Need for Change

Public concern ranges from keeping Wilderness acres at current levels to recommending substantially more Wilderness for designation from the inventory of roadless areas. Recommended Wilderness will vary based on the objectives of a particular alternative, the physical criteria of individual roadless areas, and public input.

Motorized/Non-motorized Dispersed Recreation Need for Change

A growing population, increasing recreation use, and new developments and interests among recreational activities have resulted in a decrease in

the quality of the recreation experience on the Forest. More active management may be necessary to conserve and maintain both the high quality recreational experience and the natural resource setting in which it occurs. The current Forest Plan establishes goals emphasizing dispersed recreation and ensuring a range of recreation opportunities. However, it does not provide enough specific direction on how to meet those goals, nor did it anticipate the level of increased use that has taken place over the past 15 years. It did not consider today's high levels of interest and growth in uses such as rock climbing, mountain biking, and summer ATV trails.

Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS)

Details of the changes that have taken place since the 1986 Plan implementation can be found in the *Analysis of the Management Situation* (AMS), which was prepared as part of the planning process. This document is on file at the Supervisor's Office, White Mountain National Forest, and on the Forest's web site. A summary of the AMS can be found in Appendix A of the revised Plan.

Issues

Introduction

The need for change topics were ultimately combined into three issues: management emphasis through land allocation; timber management and wildlife habitat; and management of recreation use. Forest plan revision issues are those areas of Forest management that require a change as a result of new scientific information, changed resource conditions, a better understanding of the results of previous management based on monitoring and evaluation information, and changing public needs. Alternatives to current Forest management are developed around these issues. Each alternative addresses the issues from a different management perspective and emphasis.

Issue Indicators

The following issues resulted from the need for change summarized in the "Purpose and Need for Plan Revision" section. Each issue has one or more indicators that measure existing conditions and the potential effects of management activities. Indicators highlight differences among alternatives, and summarize the environmental, economic, and social impacts of the alternatives. Indicators are both quantitative and qualitative.

1. Management Emphasis Through Land Allocation

The existing White Mountain National Forest Plan identifies management direction through the use of management areas that provide a mix of resource management emphasis. The Forest Plan currently emphasizes dispersed recreation experiences within non-motorized landscape on approximately 54 percent of the Forest. These management areas provide for older forest conditions and large blocks of non-manipulated landscapes that are valued for both their ecological and social values. Included within this management

emphasis are 114,000 acres (fifteen percent of total Forest acres) of Congressionally-designated Wilderness.

The remaining 46 percent of the National Forest emphaszes the full range of recreation opportunities: non-motorized trails, backcountry camping, developed recreation areas, Nordic and alpine ski areas, and snowmobiling; provides a road system for pleasure driving and access, allows for timber management activities; and contains the early successional habitat that is important for some wildlife species.

This issue explores the question of whether the current management emphasis provides the needed direction for the White Mountain National Forest, or if changes should be made to meet the ecological, social, and economic demands expected of the Forest over the next 10 to 15 years. The issue also looks at whether additional areas should be proposed to Congress for Wilderness designation.

All lands are managed to ensure that long-term sustainability and visual quality objectives are maintained or improved.

Indicators

- Management area allocation and distribution (this applies to both the Management Emphasis and the Recreation Use issues).
- Number of proposed Wilderness areas.
- Acres of proposed Wilderness.
- Acres of 2.1, 2.1A, 3.1, and 9.4 lands converted to Recommended Wilderness (MA 9.1).
- Jobs attributed to Forest Service activity, average annual 1st decade.
- Income attributed to Forest Service activity, average annual 1st decade.
- Net Present Value.

2. Timber Management and Wildlife Habitat

Timber harvest accomplishes many goals. It provides a reliable source of high quality wood products, modifies wildlife habitat, maintains a healthy forest by removing trees damaged by insects and disease, and demonstrates science-based forest management.

This issue addresses how much timber is harvested on a sustainable basis from the Forest, where it is harvested, and the type of harvest treatment to be used. The issue also responds to the role of the White Mountain National forest in providing early successional forest habitat within the larger landscape. There are varying opinions on the value and need for active habitat manipulation to ensure an adequate presence of wildlife species, such as moose, deer, ruffed grouse, and some songbirds, that rrely on early successional habitat. Some people view these species as important for wildlife viewing and for hunting experiences, as well as for their intrinsic contribution to species diversity. Other people believe mature forest habitats should predominate on the National Forest because young forest habitats are available elsewhere.

Indicators

- Acres and distribution of land suitable for timber harvest.
- Acres of regeneration wildlife habitat produced by timber harvest.
- Total harvest (volume).
- Acres of suitable land not treated at 20 and 50 years.

3. Recreation Management

The current Forest Plan provides for a full range of recreation opportunities, with an emphasis on non-motorized dispersed recreation. Millions of people visit the White Mountain National Forest each year, using facilities such as trails, shelters, roads, fishing and boat access sites, overlooks, restrooms, campgrounds, and ski areas. Recreationists are important to the local and regional economy (see Chapter 3, Socio-economic effects). Growth in demand, expanded marketing, and improvements in outdoor recreation equipment have increased use and activities during all seasons. This growth and expansion may affect ecological conditions and recreational experiences. In addition to expanded use within traditional recreation activities, the Forest is being asked to accommodate a broader array of recreation experiences, including summer motorized trail vehicles and new recreational events.

This issue looks closely at how changing activities and increasing use can be managed to prevent unacceptable ecological impacts, as well as the need to provide long-term direction that ensures a range of high quality recreation opportunities. This includes protecting areas of low recreation use, while also recognizing the value of areas with high recreation use. The current Plan provides little long-term guidance or management direction for addressing new uses, or existing activities such as rock and ice climbing, outfitter and guide operations, mountain biking, and group events. The Forest Plan also needs to provide more guidance for managing recreation within Wilderness.

Indicators

- Fulfilling the Forest recreation niche and recreation goals.
- Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) objective acres and distribution.
- Miles of summer motorized trail.
- Miles of non-motorized trail.
- Capacity of backcountry facilities.
- Number of developed campground sites.
- Miles of snowmobile trails.